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ABSTRACT

Findings of a study that examined the nature and scope of censorship activity in Indiana's public schools are presented in this paper. Data were obtained from a survey that was distributed to 292 Indiana superintendents during spring 1992. A total of 241 responded, an 82 percent return rate. The data are consistent with information indicating a significant recent national increase in challenges to the public school curriculum. Following drug education, the next most frequently challenged instructional programs/materials were AIDS education and sex education. In Indiana and nationwide, the most frequently challenged library books were "The Catcher in the Rye" and "A Light in the Attic." This study reflected a shift in the targets of challenges and also indicated that challenged instructional programs/materials were more likely to be eliminated or modified than were challenged library holdings. Because parents acting alone or in groups were the primary initiators of curriculum challenges in Indiana school corporations, efforts to involve parents in curriculum decisions may need more systematic attention. A number of respondents indicated that educators engaged in self-censorship. The self-censorship was based on fears that the materials would be offensive to individuals or groups in the community for reasons other than educational merits of the programs. Given that all of the challenged instructional programs/materials in this study were removed or altered or some type of accommodation was made when the school board supported the challenges, the position of the local school board in curriculum controversies is extremely important. Two tables are included. (LMI)

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POLICY BULLETIN

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Challenges to the Curriculum in Indiana's Public Schools

by Martha McCarthy

and Carol Langdon

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Reports of attempts to censor public school curricula are increasing nationwide, and results from a study conducted by the Indiana Education Policy Center indicate that Indiana is no exception. Instructional innovations are being challenged on grounds that they conflict with traditional values or norms. This bulletin summarizes the Center's study, compares the data with national reports of curriculum censorship, and explores implications of the findings.

In 1980, when you heard "AIDS" you thought of diet candy, and the word "crack" made you think of something in a sidewalk. Planning for a global economy meant trying to sell your refrigerators in Hamilton County as well as Marion County.

Obviously, all that has changed over the past decade because of demographic shifts, technological advances, marketplace imperatives, and deadly new viruses. And as the world has changed, so too have public school programs. To prepare students for the coming decade and the century to follow, business leaders and politicians have joined educators in introducing a wide range of instructional innovations across the states.

Indiana is no exception. The state now mandates AIDS education and drug education in the schools. Additionally, hundreds of individual schools across the state are undertaking far-reaching educational experiments to engage students more actively in the learning process. Several initiatives have funding from statewide programs such as Indiana 2000 and Twenty-First Century Schools.

It is not surprising that these and other efforts to make fundamental changes in public schools are meeting with resistance from some parents and other community members because the innovations call into question traditional expectations. Over the past several years, challenges to public school programs and materials throughout the United States have steadily increased (People for the American Way [PAW], 1990, 1991, 1992). Indeed, the number of documented attempts to censor public school curricula increased by 50% from the 1990–91 to the 1991–92 school year, and this increase was especially pronounced in the Midwest (PAW, 1992).

To provide data on the nature and scope of censorship activity in Indiana's public schools, the Indiana Education Policy Center distributed a survey to 292 superintendents of Indiana school corporations during the 1992 spring semester. The return rate for the survey was 82% (n=241). The survey sought information on challenges to instructional programs/materials and library holdings over a 10-year period (1982–83 to 1991–92). By the term "challenge" we mean an attempt to restrict or prevent use of a particular instructional program/material or library holding in public schools. "Instructional programs/materials" are programs, support materials, and teaching methods; "library holdings" are books and other media accessible to students. Among questions the survey asked were the following: How widespread are attempts to censor the curriculum in Indiana's public schools? What instructional programs/materials and library holdings have been targeted over the past 10 years? Who initiated the challenges? What were the central allegations made against the challenged items? How were the challenges resolved? Has there been evidence of self-censorship among educators, and if so, has its frequency changed over time?

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TABLE 1

Number of Indiana School Corporations Reporting Challenges from 1982–83 to 1991–92

Number of Reported Challenges	Corporations Reporting Challenges to Instructional Programs Only	Corporations Reporting Challenges to Library Holdings Only	Corporations Reporting Challenges to Both Instructional Programs and Library Holdings	Total Corporations Reporting Challenges*
1	27	24	—	51 (54%)
2	5	4	16	25 (27%)
3	2	1	3	6 (6%)
4	1	2	2	5 (5%)
5	0	1	2	3 (3%)
6	0	0	1	1 (1%)
7	0	0	1	1 (1%)
8	0	0	1	1 (1%)
9	0	0	1	1 (1%)
Total	35	32	27	94 (99%)

*Percentages are rounded.

Scope of Challenges in Indiana

Of the 241 superintendents responding to our survey, almost two fifths (39%, n=94) reported a total of 184 challenges to instructional programs/materials or library holdings in their school corporations from 1982–83 to 1991–92. The largest number of challenges documented in a single district was 9, and about 19% of the corporations (n=18) experienced 3 or more challenges during this 10-year period (see Table 1, this page). Over half (54%, n=51) of those reporting challenges listed only 1 incident, and another 27% (n=25) listed 2 incidents.

The 184 reported challenges were about evenly divided between instructional programs/materials (n=91) and library holdings (n=93). However, recent reports were more likely to focus on instructional programs/materials. For example, during the fall of 1991 and early spring of 1992 there were 39 reported challenges to instructional programs/materials compared to 23 challenges to library holdings.

Almost one third of the 94 superintendents who listed challenges (n=27) indicated that *both* instructional programs/materials *and* library holdings had been targeted in their school corporations during the 10-year period. Comparable numbers of superintendents reported challenges *only* to instructional programs/materials (n=35, 37%) or library holdings (n=32, 34%). Although 147 respondents (61%) indicated that there had been no challenges during this time period, over one third of them (n=54) reported evidence of self-censorship in their corporations.

Respondents provided dates for 171 of the 184 challenges they documented. These dates indicated that there were far more challenges to instructional programs/materials from 1989 to 1992 (n=68) than there were from 1982 to 1988 (n=17). The number of challenges to library holdings reported by respondents also increased after 1988, although not as dramatically. There were 32 reported challenges to library holdings from 1982 to 1988 and 54 such incidents from 1989 to 1992. These data must be interpreted with caution, however, as memory tends to be better regarding the recent past, and the tenure of many respondents may not span 10 years.

When analyzed by geographic region, the data yielded some interesting findings. While respondents from all areas of the state reported challenges, the greatest number of challenges occurred in a band across the south-central region of the state. (The promise of confidentiality precludes identi-

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fying specific school corporations.) Also, there was evidence of a ripple effect: only nine corporations reporting challenges were not adjacent to a corporation that also reported at least one challenge.

When the data were analyzed with school corporations grouped by mean per-capita income or mean level of educational attainment, no statistically significant patterns emerged. In other words, these socioeconomic variables did not correlate with the presence of a challenge in a particular corporation. The factor most likely to be associated with the incidence of a challenge was whether a neighboring school corporation also had experienced one or more challenges.

Targets of Challenges

Instructional Programs/Materials

As noted, survey respondents identified 91 challenges to curricular programs, textbook series, and related instructional materials during the 10-year period. Forty-five different items were targeted, but over half of the challenges (n=55) were directed toward six program categories (see Table 2, this page). The most frequently targeted category was drug education (n=34), especially a program called *Quest*, which has versions for grades K–5, grades 6–8, and grades 9–12. Respondents reported 32 challenges to *Quest* materials, with all but 2 occurring from 1989 to 1992.

Following drug education, the next most frequently challenged instructional programs/materials were AIDS education (n=7) and sex education (n=5). Elementary counseling and guidance programs were challenged in four corporations. Respondents from two of these corporations named a specific program, *Pumsy: In Pursuit of Excellence*, as the target of the challenges. Integrated thematic instruction, including inservice teacher training and teacher training materials authored by Susan Kovalik, was challenged in three corporations. Human growth and development programs were challenged in two corporations. Each of the remaining 36 instructional programs/materials was challenged only one time.

Library Holdings

Respondents identified 82 different library holdings in 93 reported challenges over the past 10 years, ranging from the *American Dictionary of Slang* to *The Witches of Worm*. The reported library challenges were more diverse than were challenges to instructional programs/materials in that the same library holding was not often targeted in more than one school corporation. Whereas six instructional programs (representing 55 incidents) were challenged in more than one school corporation during the decade, only 4 library holdings (representing 15 incidents) were challenged in more than one district during this time.

The most frequently challenged library holding was J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (n=7), and Shel Silverstein's *A Light in the Attic* was the target of four challenges (see Table 2). Other books challenged in at least two school corporations were *Of Mice and Men*, by John Steinbeck, and *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective. Each of the remaining 78 library holdings was challenged only one time. Authors of books with only one challenge were identified to determine if more than one was written by the same author. Authors challenged more than once included Richard Bach, Judy Blume, Stephen King (one respondent said "any book by Stephen King"), Katherine Paterson, Alvin Schwartz, and Zilpha Keatley Snyder.

The Challengers

Respondents identified (by category) the challengers for 169 of the 184 incidents. When challenges to instructional materials/programs and library holdings were combined, the most frequently cited challengers were parents (76%, n=128), either acting alone (n=76) or in groups (n=52). A lone

TABLE 2

Instructional Programs/Materials and Library Holdings Challenged in More Than One Indiana School Corporation (1982–83 to 1991–92)

Instructional Programs/Materials	*Number of Reported Challenges*
Drug prevention programs	34
AIDS education	7
Sex education	5
Elementary counseling and guidance programs	4
Integrated thematic instruction	3
Human growth and development programs	2

Library Holdings	*Number of Reported Challenges*
The Catcher in the Rye	7
A Light in the Attic	4
Of Mice and Men	2
Our Bodies, Ourselves	2

parent was more likely to be cited as the challenger to library holdings than was a group, whereas groups of parents were more likely to be listed as initiating challenges to instructional programs/materials. Individuals or groups identified as representing religious interests comprised 13% (n=22) of those initiating challenges. Eagle Forum, a national conservative group started by Phyllis Schlafly, was specifically named as initiating four challenges, and three of these challenges were directed toward *Quest*. The Indiana Family Institute, founded in 1990 and aligned with a national conservative group (Focus on the Family), was listed as initiating two challenges, both to integrated thematic instruction. A number of other respondents noted that a parent or parents affiliated with local ministers or unidentified concerned citizen groups initiated challenges. Although several respondents reported that challengers were encouraged by national organizations representing the religious right, the extent to which parents' actions were influenced by state or national groups could not be ascertained from these data.

Central Allegations

Central complaints against instructional programs/materials and library holdings tended to fall into one of three general areas: *values concerns* (the material provides information that conflicts with a family's value system, e.g., it encourages independent decision making that undermines parental authority); *religious concerns* (the material provides information that conflicts with a family's religious beliefs, e.g., it discusses the theory of evolution); and *pedagogical concerns* (the material lacks educational merit, e.g., its use in developing decision-making skills is not proven by research).

Values Concerns

About half of all reported allegations focused on concerns that the messages in instructional programs/materials or library holdings conflicted with common standards of decency or family values. Criticisms tended to be reported in broad language and included such complaints as the content was "vulgar" and "trashy" (*The Catcher in the Rye*), "teaching unacceptable values" (*Pumsy*), or "anti-family, schools should not encourage critical thinking, values should not be taught" (*Quest*). Occasionally, respondents stated simply that the programs or materials "teach values."

The most frequent religious criticisms of instructional programs/materials were grouped under the rubric "New Age."

Most often respondents indicated that the content conflicted with the challengers' own standards of decency, for example, by using unacceptable language or images. Twenty-six books were challenged for bad language. Respondents also noted that the messages in programs or books were challenged as undermining or usurping parental authority. Instructional programs that incorporate exercises in values clarification, decision making, and critical thinking, such as the *Quest* drug prevention program and elementary counseling and guidance programs, were sometimes attacked as undermining both family values and religious beliefs.

Another subset of allegations pertaining to values concerns focused on the issue of whether sex education and related topics (e.g., AIDS education) should be included in the curriculum. These allegations were expressed in such terms as "schools should not teach these subjects" or "sex should not be mentioned." One respondent reported that an AIDS curriculum guide was challenged because it "encouraged improper behavior." Some programs/materials were faulted because "abstinence is not stressed" or because they "promote sex outside marriage and condom usage."

Religious Concerns

Over one fourth of the allegations expressed religious concerns. Instructional programs/materials and library holdings were frequently criticized for being "anti-religious," "anti-God," or "anti-Christ." "Secular humanism" was specifically listed as the central allegation in 10 challenges. Only a few respondents reported that programs, books, or materials were challenged because of their pro-religious bias, such as a film that included a statement about creation science, which was criticized as "fundamental religious dogma."

The most frequent religious criticisms of instructional programs/materials were grouped under the rubric "New Age." Thirteen respondents specifically named "New Age," "New Age movement," "New Age programming," "New Age religion," or "teaches New Age" as the basis for challenges. For example, *Project Merit* (a self-esteem building program) was criticized for being "New Age, occult and inappropriate subject matter." Among other instructional programs/materials challenged for advancing New Age doctrine were elementary guidance counseling programs, whole language reading instruction, integrated thematic instruction, and the drug prevention program *Quest*. Interestingly, New Age was not specifically listed as a central allegation to any challenged library holdings. However, concepts that critics often associate with New Age—satanism, witchcraft, the occult, and secular humanism (see Michaelsen, 1989)—were identified as the basis for challenges to 27 library holdings.

Pedagogical Concerns

Slightly over one tenth of all the allegations pertained to the educational merit of instructional programs/materials or methods used in programs. Some programs/materials and library holdings were challenged because of their inappropriateness for the developmental age of the children. The instructional method used in a mastery learning program was challenged for being "manipulative." A second-grade mathematics class was faulted for incorporating cooperative learning methods and not emphasizing skill development. One program was criticized because there was "not enough parent involvement in setting up the program." The use of another program in developing critical thinking was questioned as its effectiveness allegedly had not been proven by research.

Outcomes of Challenges

We asked respondents to describe how each challenge was resolved. Also, they were asked to explain their school board's position regarding the challenge.

Disposition of Challenges

The superintendents provided usable data on decisions for 157 of the 184 identified challenges, and they reported that decisions were pending regarding 7 additional challenges. In 62% of the 157 incidents (n=98), instructional programs/materials (n=39) or library holdings (n=59) remained unaltered in the curriculum or library. Nine instructional programs and 7 library holdings were removed, and parts of 3 additional instructional programs were eliminated. Four other instructional programs were never fully implemented because of the challenges. Ten challenges resulted in the programs or items being modified, and access to 15 instructional programs/materials or library holdings was restricted. As a result of 11 other challenges, students were offered alternative assignments.

Quest was the single instructional program most often eliminated from the curriculum (n=4). *Pumsy: In Pursuit of Excellence* was dropped from the curriculum in both instances where it was challenged. Instructional programs that were not implemented after they were challenged included *Quest* (n=2), integrated thematic instruction (n=1), and mastery learning (n=1). Among instructional programs/materials that were modified as a result of challenges were an AIDS education program, a human growth and development program, a self-esteem building program (*Project Merit*), a sex education program, and a spelling book.

Challenged instructional programs/materials were far more likely to be eliminated or modified than were challenged library holdings.

Eliminated library holdings specifically named were *Welcome to Vietnam*, by Zack Emerson, *The Last Mission*, by Harry Mazer, and *Thrasher Magazine*. One parent resolved a challenge by destroying the offending library book (*The Life of Stalin*).

Although the total challenges to instructional programs/materials and library holdings were comparable, the outcomes were quite different. Whereas 26 challenged instructional programs/materials were eliminated or modified, only 7 challenged library holdings were removed.

School Board's Role

The superintendents provided information about school board positions for 81 of the 184 challenges. In over four fifths of these (84%, n=68), respondents said school boards supported the instructional program/material or library holding, or boards supported the person or persons responsible for making a decision to keep the challenged item (e.g., school administrators, the professional staff, or a review committee). Of these 68 cases, 55 items (81%) stayed in the curriculum or school library unaltered. Only 13 items (19%) were removed, restricted, or altered in some way.

School boards supported or partially supported those initiating 12 challenges (15%)—9 to instructional programs/materials and 3 to library holdings. In all of these cases the challengers prevailed in that items were removed or modified or other accommodations were made. Six of these challenges resulted in the item being removed from the public school curriculum or library, and part of another program was eliminated. One program on human growth and development was completely rewritten, and a sex education program was also changed. A cooperative learning program was reduced to a pilot project, and another program was altered by moving it to a higher grade level. One magazine was placed on restricted access.

In a separate challenge, the school board's position changed during the controversy over the sex education portion of a human growth and development curriculum. The original school board stood behind the challenged curriculum but agreed to submit it to an administrative review. Meanwhile, a board election resulted in a new board that revised the curriculum completely.

Evidence of Self-Censorship

In addition to challenges from parents or others external to the school, educators themselves may censor books and materials by removing them from school library shelves or choosing not to use them as part of the curriculum. In our survey, "self-cen-

sorship" was defined as teachers, librarians, or administrators deciding not to use particular materials *because of fear of controversy*. Forty-three percent of the respondents (n=103) agreed that there had been evidence of such self-censorship in their corporations. Over half (n=54) of the respondents who reported self-censorship did not report *any* challenges to instructional programs/materials or library holdings.

When they were asked to describe specific instances of self-censorship, respondents often reported events that did not clearly correspond to the survey definition of self-censorship as a decision based on fear of controversy. For example, many respondents noted that their school corporation had a selection committee and/or policy governing the review of materials before they were purchased and/or used. Respondents said community standards guided those selecting materials for the schools. They also identified "good judgment," "common sense," and "good taste" as criteria used to select materials for school libraries and the curriculum.

Many people agree that the public school has a role in transmitting values, but there is little consensus about what those values should be and who should make this determination.

Many respondents cited instances of self-censorship in which materials were removed or restricted because the principal or librarian thought the materials were not suitable for the children's age level. Several respondents described instances of self-censorship in which librarians censored materials they personally found offensive. For example, one respondent reported that a librarian did not approve of Stephen King books, so his books were not on the library shelves. Another respondent said high school students had requested that gay and lesbian materials be purchased, but the librarian did not condone keeping such materials in the school library. One respondent said it was necessary to exercise self-censorship because "children's books are becoming more and more open about suicide and sex."

Although they were not asked to list specific materials subjected to self-censorship, a number of respondents offered such information. The library holding most often listed as the target of self-censorship was the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue. Other items identified as censored by school staff members were the same as the targets of challenges—sex education materials, AIDS instructional materials, books with offensive language, and the *Quest* curriculum. Science books and the materials developed by Susan Kovalik for integrated thematic instruction were also identified as subjects of self-censorship. One respondent said the school corporation edited Whittle Communication's Channel One television broadcast on a "daily" basis.

Some respondents indicated that those responsible for selecting materials had been more cautious following a curriculum challenge in the school. Several said fear of conflict with conservative groups motivated school staff to exercise caution in the selection and use of materials. One superintendent reported that teachers deleted potentially objectionable language when reading aloud in class, and another indicated that teachers offered alternative selections to students when potentially controversial books were assigned in literature courses.

When asked if self-censorship had increased over the past decade, 38% (n=39) of all those reporting self-censorship said that it had. Respondents who indicated that there had been challenges to instructional programs/materials reported an increase in self-censorship over a 10-year period more frequently than did respondents who documented challenges only to library holdings.

Discussion

Curriculum challenges often are complex and do not lend themselves to simple resolutions. There are, for example, a number of actors—students, teachers, parents, and school boards—asserting a stake in what public schools teach, and each group is not of a single mind. While many people agree that the public school has a role in transmitting values, there is little consensus about *what* those values should be and *who* should make this determination. There is an underlying tension between the school's role in nurturing individuals to engage in open and informed inquiry and its role in preparing individuals for citizenship and inculcating community norms (see Clarick, 1990).

The fact that 82% of the superintendents in Indiana responded to this survey attests to the widespread interest in challenges to instructional programs and library materials throughout our state. The data gathered in Indiana are consistent with information indicating a significant recent increase nationally in challenges to the public school curriculum. The specific targets may vary across states; for example, the *Impressions* reading series is the most challenged item in California (Adler, 1991), whereas *Quest* is the primary target in Indiana. However, all regions of the country are facing an increase in challenges to public school programs and materials (PAW, 1992).

Also, there is similarity in the targets reported in our state and nationally. According to People for the American Way (1992), *Quest* and *Pumsy: In Pursuit of Excellence* were among the five most frequently challenged materials throughout the United States in 1991–92; they also were among the most frequently challenged programs

reported in our Indiana survey. The Indiana and national data also correspond regarding the most contested library books. *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Of Mice and Men* were among the most frequently challenged books in Indiana's school corporations, as they were nationally in 1991–92 (PAW, 1992). Moreover, the data from Indiana are consistent with national reports that challenges are shifting from individual library books to instructional programs/materials.

Not only does this study reflect a shift in the targets of challenges, but our results also indicate that challenged instructional programs/materials were far more likely to be eliminated or modified than were challenged library holdings. In short, the success rate was considerably higher for those attacking instructional programs than for those contesting individual library books. This finding has significant implications, given the recent emphasis on restructuring schools and engaging students in more active mastery of higher-level thinking skills. As noted in the introduction, some educators who are considering new strategies and instructional programs are concerned

Since parents acting alone or in groups were the primary initiators of curriculum challenges, efforts to involve parents in curriculum decisions may need more systematic attention.

that efforts to redesign instructional programs and make them more meaningful to learners are being seriously threatened by challenges from parent groups. Some parents simply do not understand the educational rationale for the new programs, whereas others sincerely feel that the programs or materials are harmful to their children and/or threaten their deeply held values. Regardless of their motivation, parents and citizen groups will likely continue to challenge instructional innovations.

Since parents acting alone or in groups were the primary initiators of curriculum challenges in Indiana school corporations, efforts to involve parents in curriculum decisions may need more systematic attention. Problems often have arisen where new programs have been adopted without sufficient education of parents as to the pedagogical rationale. Programs are more likely to be aborted before getting off the ground in situations where the education and involvement of parents have been inadequate.

We were surprised by the amount of self-censorship reported. Self-censorship usually is not well documented, and there may be a tendency to deny its existence. Thus, it is noteworthy that over two fifths of the respondents indicated that educators in their corporations engaged in self-censorship. A number of respondents noted that the self-censorship was based on fears that the materials would be offensive to individuals or groups in the community for reasons other than the educational merits of the programs.

Given that all of the challenged instructional programs/materials in this study were removed or altered or some type of accommodation was made *when the school board supported the challengers*, the position of the local board in curriculum controversies is extremely important. Less than 20% of the challenges were successful where school boards initially supported the challenged programs or materials. Although the data in this study did not substantiate that national groups have a significant influence in Indiana school corporations, several of these national conservative groups, especially Citizens for Excellence in Education (CEE) and the National Association of Christian Educators, have targeted school board elections as the most viable strategy to influence public school curriculum and instruction. For example, CEE claimed that its chapters elected about 2,000 local school board members from 1989 until 1992 (Nazario, 1992). If a school board

The recent increase in censorship activity in Indiana has coincided with new statutory curriculum specifications.

is sympathetic to those challenging the curriculum, the contested programs or materials are likely to be removed. And if a board does not reflect the community's sentiments regarding components of the instructional program, a new board might be elected, as happened in one Indiana school corporation reported in our survey. This finding again highlights the importance of educating the community regarding the pedagogical merits of programs and materials.

The data from this study of Indiana school corporations support the national reports of an increase in censorship activity, especially beginning in 1989. This increase in Indiana has coincided with new statutory curriculum specifications (e.g., a 1988 law requiring school corporations to include AIDS instruction; a 1990 law requiring that drug education be taught at every grade level). It also has coincided with national reports of the mounting influence of conservative parent groups in determining the public school curriculum (see Nazario, 1992; Sommerfeld, 1993). While challenges cannot be averted and all concerns deserve a forum where they can be aired, educators need to be aware of the scope of censorship efforts and their significant implications for the use of innovative instructional strategies and materials.

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